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ABSTRACT

The United States has admitted more than 1 million Southeast Asian refugees since 1975. The impact of these refugees on language and literacy education has been profound; many innovations in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) education have derived from efforts to meet their language and literacy needs. The first wave of refugees in the mid-1970s included individuals with high levels of education. The debate that began in 1975 continues today: Should refugees receive intensive language and job training before entering the labor force, or should they get jobs right away and study English part-time? A U.S. policy represented a compromise between the two positions, and government programs provided up to 3 years of public assistance including free language education. Literacy was not explicitly taught. The second wave of refugees, including many rural people with little schooling, came in the late 1970s. Their arrival resulted in two major educational developments: the 1980 Overseas Refugee Training Program, and a re-examination of the entire approach to refugee education. Today's Southeast Asian refugees--largely Hmong, an ethnic minority from Laos, and former political prisoners from Vietnam--are arriving at a time of diminishing government support for refugee education and growing pressure for refugees to become employed as soon as possible. Newcomers with more than basic English skills are at a disadvantage, pushed to find jobs and study English part-time. Refugees with higher English skills have difficulty finding an appropriate ESL program. However, programs are adapting to current needs and interests. (LB)

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Language and Literacy Education for Southeast Asian Refugees

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Since 1975, the United States has admitted more than 1 million Southeast Asian refugees. The impact of these refugees on language and literacy education has been profound; many innovations in adult ESL (English as a second langugae) education in the past two decades have derived from efforts to meet the language and literacy needs of these refugees. This digest describes some of these efforts, showing how the field of refugee education has developed since 1975 in response to shifts in the refugee population, new ideas in language and literacy education, and changing levels of government support for programs serving refugees.

The First Wave

The first groups of Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States shortly after the fall of the U.S.-supported governments in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. As Baker and North (1984) point out, the first refugees to flee a country are usually those with power and wealth, since they have the most to lose under the new regime, and the first groups of Southeast Asian refugees included many high-ranking government officials and other members of the elite. Their level of education was considerably higher than the national average in their countries. Most had attended high school; many had attended college (Baker & North, 1984).

Soon after the arrival of the first wave, government-funded English language and resettlement programs for refugees were launched around the United States. While policy makers and service providers agreed that refugees needed English training, they disagreed on how much training was needed and on when in the resettlement process it should take place. The debate that began in 1975 continues to this day: Should refugees receive intensive language and job training *before* entering the labor force, or should they get jobs right away and study English part time (North, Lewin, & Wagner, 1982)? Advocates for the first position, known as front-end loading, argued that such an approach, while more expensive in the short run, would be less expensive in the long run because trained refugees would be more likely to find stable jobs and would be less likely to need support in the future. Advocates of early employment argued that training would not make enough of a difference to justify its expense, that public assistance was habit forming, and that one activity did not exclude the other: Refugees could work full time and study part time. There was also some concern that at a time of rising unemployment among U.S. workers, expensive training programs for refugees could cause resentment and contribute to a rising antirefugee sentiment.

The policy put in place in 1975 represented a compromise between the two positions. Government programs provided up to three years of public assistance for refugees, during which time refugees could receive free language education. Few programs, however, offered the intensive, full-time language and job training that advocates of front-end loading wanted. In most areas of the country, refugees received 9-15 hours a week of ESL and a basic orientation to the world of work.

The kind of ESL that Southeast Asian refugees have received at different times since 1975 has reflected ideas and practices about language teaching current at those times. In the early refugee programs, the content was often general English—the English that an ESL or EFL student anywhere might study—and the methodology was audiolingualism, with its primary focus on pronunciation and structure, rather than on communication (Grognet, 1981). There was little connection between the English that refugees studied and the English they used outside their classrooms.

Another common characteristic of the early programs was that literacy was not explicitly taught (Ranard, 1981). A basic principle in audiolingualism held that language learners should learn to speak the language before learning to read and write it, and most teachers felt no urgent need to teach literacy. Most of their students were already literate in their own languages, and many could read and write English with considerable proficiency.

The Second Wave

In the late 1970s, war, persecution, and poverty in Southeast Asia unleashed a second exodus, by land and sea, of hundreds of thousands of people. In contrast to the first group, this wave included large numbers of rural people, many of whom had never attended school or been exposed to modern urban life. Shifting at jet speed from familar Southeast Asian surroundings to cities and suburbs across the United States, they frequently found themselves in linguistic and cross-cultural confusion.

Concern about these refugees and the capacity of local communities to absorb them led to two major educational developments. One was the creation in 1980 of the Overseas Refugee Training Program, a language and cultural orientation program with sites in Southeast Asia to prepare U.S.-bound refugees for life in the United States. A second development was a re-examination of the entire approach to refugee education (Grognet, 1981).

The second-wave refugees arrived at a time of growing dissatisfaction among ESL educators with traditional methodology and curriculum. The field was ready for a change, and the sudden arrival of large numbers of refugees with pressing social needs provided the impetus. The result was the competency-based approach. With this approach, the focus was not on language form but on the language content needed for real-life tasks—how and when to dial 911, how to explain a medical problem, or how to get information about a job. In 1984, a core competency-based curriculum, called the Mainstream English Language Training curriculum, was developed by a group of refugee educators for use by government-funded refugee programs (Adkins, 1985).

At the same time these new curricula were being developed, the arrival of large numbers of students with little or no formal education led to the creation of a new subfield, ESL literacy. Before the arrival of these refugees, this area had received scant attention in adult ESL. With little in their own field to guide them, ESL literacy educators turned for ideas to the work of elementary reading specialists and adult educators in the third world. ESL literacy became an arena of lively debate: Should efforts be solely focused on the survival language refugees needed during their first months of resettlement? How do second-language learners best learn to read and write—through a a skills-based approach, a whole language approach, or some combination of the two? Should native language literacy play a part in English literacy acqusition? In the mid-1980s, educators influenced by the work of Paolo Freire entered the debate, asking questions that continue to resonate today not only in ESL literacy, but throughout the field of adult ESL: What should the content of the curriculum be, and who should decide (Auerbach, 1992; Wallerstein, 1983)?

Current Southeast Asian Groups

In the late 1980s, the composition of the Southeast Asian refugee flow changed again. Today, Southeast Asian refugees are largely made up of two groups: the Hmong, an ethnic minority from Laos, and former political prisoners (FPPS) from Vietnam. The two groups are nearly polar opposites in their educational backgrounds and needs. Most Hmong adults arrive in the United States with little or no formal schooling and few vocational skills. Most FPPs, in contrast, are well educated former military officers (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1991).

In the United States, FPPs and the Hmong share one disadvantage: They are arriving at a time of diminishing government support for refugee education and growing pressure on refugees to become employed as soon as possible after they arrive in the United States. Whereas refugees in 1975 were eligible for 36 months of public assistance and free language training, today's refugees can receive a maximum of 8 months.

Reduced government support has affected both the amount and the quality of ESL that refugees receive. Many refugee programs, unable to exist as separate, self-contained entities, have been incorporated into larger adult ESL programs that serve both immigrants and refugees. The quality of these programs varies tremendously. Some maintain high standards and are doing innovative work, but they are the exceptions (Wrigley, 1993). The typical program is staffed by part-time teachers with little or no training in their field and a bare-bones budget that does not permit curriculum development or in-service staff training (Bliss, 1988).

Refugees who arrive in the United States with more than basic English are at a special disadvantage. With cutbacks in government funding, newcomers with some English skills feel particular pressure from resettlement agencies to become employed soon after they arrive. In theory, employed refugees can study English part time; most, however, find it difficult, especially during the first few years of resettlement, to fit language study into busy schedules filled with work and family demands. If they can find time to study ESL, refugees with more than basic English often discover there are no classes for them. For refugees at intermediate and high intermediate levels of English proficiency, the risk of not finding an appropriate program is high, since their English is often too advanced for adult education programs, yet not advanced enough for community college ESL or mainstream vocational training courses.

Promising Practices

The situation is not without hope. Programs that once exclusively served refugees and now serve a mixed population of refugees and immigrants have in some cases managed to adapt their curricula to changing learner needs. Meeting the needs of new arrivals and longtime residents in the same class takes skill and experience, but it is a situation rich with opportunity for participatory education, since the more experienced class members can serve as resources to the newcomers (S. Otero, personal comunication, August 1993).

In some programs, a more diverse population of learners has led to more attention to the needs of those at the upper levels of English proficiency. An immigrant/refugee program in Arlington, Virginia, for example, has recently added a pre-academic class to help students prepare for study at the local community college. With the addition of this course, the program now serves refugees and immigrants at all levels of English proficiency, need, and interest.

Conclusion

The modern field of refugee education emerged in 1975, shortly after the arrival of the first groups of Southeast Asian refugees. Today, 18 years later, the future of refugee education as a separate field is unclear. Whatever its future, there is little doubt that the field has made lasting contributions to language and literacy education.

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